

# Drug Court, 10 years and counting

## Speaker Ralston calls area program a "model for the state"

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Their testimonials were powerful and heartfelt, with grown men being reduced to tears as they reflected on how their lives have changed for the better since entering the area's drug court program.

Last Thursday, Feb. 16, seven people, both men and women, took the stage at Chatahoochee Technical College's Appalachian Campus as graduates of the now 10-year old Appalachian Judicial Circuit Drug Court.

According to Appalachian Judicial Circuit Chief Superior Court Judge Brenda Weaver, who was instrumental in founding the local court back in 2002, the local "accountability court" began its life in a much more skeptical landscape than what exists now. Weaver says since it was founded a decade ago alternative treatment programs have gained respect of political, judicial and other leaders across the nation.

Drug courts aim at rehabilitation, not imprisonment, for non-violent drug offenders, but those who run the program say it is by no means a get out-of-jail-free card. There is hard work and dedication involved, they say, and completing the program is truly something to be proud of.

Participants are required to complete a minimum of a 24-month program, which includes intensive alcohol and drug-intensive outpatient treatment including group therapy, counseling, random drug testing, supervision, recurring court appearances, participation in 12-step meetings (such as AA or NA), observable progress towards family, employment and educational goals, and the return to a crime and drug-free lifestyle.

Participants must also be able to pay program fees and find transportation to and from all meetings, screenings and court appearances. But in the end their charges are dropped and they

can, ideally, reintegrate into society as more healthy, happy and productive members of society.

To celebrate the success of the local drug court program, which has both a family and adult branch with approximately 113 active participants, all the stops were pulled out at the most recent graduation ceremony, where dozens of high-ranking leaders from the judicial, political and other government agencies from the region attended to show their support.

Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Carol Hunstein and Georgia's Speaker of the House David Ralston, both longtime advocates of accountability courts and alternative sentencing in Georgia, were in attendance, along with several judges from superior courts around the circuit, visiting district attorneys, probate judges, magistrate judges, sheriffs and other law enforcement, local and regional leaders and dozens of others involved in drug courts here and in the surrounding area.

Judge Weaver touted both Ralston and Hunstein for their continued support of drug courts, and went on to recognize those in the circuit who have supported the program since the beginning.

Speaker Ralston also recognized those people who have "worked so long and so hard to make this such a successful drug court program," which he called a model program for the state.

"But more than that I want to thank the families and the friends of the graduates," he added. "This has truly been about you, about making our communities a better place one life at a time, so I want to congratulate you."

Hunstein then applauded Judge Weaver for her role as a tireless leader in the local drug court program, and, like all speakers that night, she warmly congratulated the graduates for their hard work and dedication.

"To the seven very special people who are graduating, this is your night," Hunstein said, who shared that both of her parents died of alcoholism.



The seven most recent graduates of the Appalachian Judicial Circuit Drug Court pose with local family drug court Judge John Worcester and adult drug court Judge Brenda Weaver.

"This is your celebration. It marks the end of one part of your life and the beginning of another," she said. "Tonight you have shown that you can reach your goals. Think of where you were two years ago, that journey you have taken. You should know now there are no limits to what you can do with your life."

Right (l to r), Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Carol Hunstein, Appalachian Judicial Circuit Chief Superior Court Judge Brenda Weaver and Georgia's Speaker of the House David Ralston at the most recent Appalachian Judicial Circuit Drug Court graduation.

